



Trainlike bus plan is light on details

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Sal Ramirez can tell you how wonderful light rail is back home in Monterrey, Mexico.

"Better than driving a car."

And he can tell you about the long hours it takes riding buses to get from his temporary base in Northwest San Antonio to various house-painting jobs.

"Not the same," the 57-year-old said. "You can't compare riding a bus to driving a car."

But when it comes to sizing up bus rapid transit, Ramirez's dark, thoughtful eyes go blank and he slowly shakes his head.

"No," is all he said.

Bus rapid transit is a sort of unlikely blend of light rail and buses that cities in recent years have started taking more seriously. It's a way to make buses look, feel and operate more like light rail without spending as much.

After San Antonio voters thrashed a light-rail proposal seven years ago, VIA Metropolitan Transit officials quietly retreated to their offices to chart a new future — one that would be a lot cheaper.

"Bus rapid transit emerged as the primary choice," said Tim Tuggey, a former VIA board member who championed light rail and later, while serving as chairman, helped usher in plans for the faster, sleeker buses.

"So we started down that path," he said.

Treatments to morph buses into rail-like service include bus-only lanes, articulated buses that bend in the middle, stations with plenty of seats and shelter, real-time message boards, no fare boxes, fewer stops, and technology to hold or trip traffic signals to keep buses moving.

End results depend on how far decision-makers are willing to go — spend a little to simply polish and speed up basic bus service, or spend a lot to produce a hybrid that looks like light rail on wheels. "You could easily have the same costs as light rail," said Todd Hemingson, who oversaw VIA's rapid-bus plans until late last year when he left to join Austin's transit agency. "But the question in this community is, at what cost?"

VIA officials figure they can take their busiest corridor — Fredericksburg Road — and add bus lanes, transit stations every half-mile and other features to shave travel times and coax people out of their cars.

Today's 50-minute bus trip covering 8 miles from downtown to the Medical Center could shrink to 35 minutes or so. And 9,600 daily boardings on routes 91 and 92 could swell to as much 12,000 on the shiny new rapid buses.

For \$95 million — about enough to build 361/2 miles of VIA's old light-rail plan — the rapid-bus line could be real in five years, officials say.

If it works, roads such as San Pedro Avenue, Commerce Street, Nogalitos and South New Braunfels could be next.

"It makes a lot of sense," said Daniel Kendricks, 27, who abandons his car about once a month and rides buses, including last week because of repairs.

He'll ride the rapid buses as long as they pass his simple test: "If it's convenient for me and it saves gas."

As good as rail?

But as VIA starts an environmental study this year, questions run rampant and details are tough to pin down.

Should rapid-transit fares be the same or higher than regular buses? Should the route going into downtown follow Frio and Medina streets, or Cypress and San Pedro? And just how closely can buses mimic light rail on the cheap?

Among rail's biggest selling points is that white-collar professionals will flock to trains while shunning buses, and tracks fixed in place for decades persuade developers to invest millions of dollars to build stores and apartments in tight, walkable areas near stations.

"That's what good transit does, it creates more of a walking world," said David Dobbs of Light Rail Now.

Dallas' famed Mockingbird Station is a stellar example of how light rail can attract high-end pedestrian developments. Some advocates say buses, gussied up or not, will never muster enough traffic and investor interest to do that.

Such naysayers include conservative Paul Weyrich of the Free Congress Foundation, one of the heavy hitters VIA brought to town to wow luncheon crowds in the months before the 2000 light-rail election.

"No matter how much the seats are made more comfortable, a bus is still a bus," he later said in a Houston Chronicle commentary as a reborn VIA laid its plans for fancier buses.

But the marksman recruited by the conservative Texas Public Policy Foundation to refute VIA's light-rail assumptions, Wendell Cox of the Heartland Institute, says bus systems can be better than trains if designed to rail standards.

"They can attract just as many riders, at a fraction of the cost," he said on his Web site.

Weyrich, Cox and other pundits seem to easily wade through an increasing number of studies and counterclaims weighing the merits of rapid buses.

But the tangle of arguments, underpinned by a decades-long dispute pitting buses against trains, leaves few clear answers for commuters. Truth is, buses can be made to work just as good as light rail, but it doesn't come cheap, says Todd Litman of the Victoria Transport Policy Institute, a research group that compares costs and benefits of driving and using transit.

"Bus rapid transit can be very successful if you make a major commitment," he said.

"The question is, which is cheaper?"

Things change

Little known in San Antonio is that when voters approved an Advanced Transportation District in November 2004, they also gave VIA permission to build light rail.

That's because the state law that authorizes the district, along with bus rapid transit, is a reworked version of the light-rail bill, and the rail language was left in.

But two things stop VIA from dabbling with light rail.

First, the 2004 election to raise the sales tax by a quarter-cent was sold as a way to start rapid buses and expand regular service. A resolution, as binding as the word of board members at any given time, says the agency won't consider light rail without going back to voters. Second, and more formidable, is lack of money. The Texas Public Policy Foundation, an Austin think tank, joined with highway interests to press VIA into changing its rapid-transit bill, giving half of an expected \$34 million a year to roads.

Voters signed off on the funding split when they authorized the transportation district.

Since VIA's half isn't enough to seriously finance light rail, and the citywide sales tax is now near a state cap, San Antonio essentially locked itself out of having rail service for years to come, maybe decades.

When Austin opens its 32-mile commuter rail line next year, San Antonio will be the only major city in Texas without passenger trains. "You know what's wrong with San Antonio, it's auto-centric," said Thom Robey, a local architect who for years worked to change how the city grows.

Yet, there has been a recent shift in thinking. The Metropolitan Planning Organization, which oversees federal and state transportation dollars for this area, last month allocated \$29 million for VIA's rapid buses. Sales tax money and federal grants will pay for most of the rest.

The vote was historic for the planning board, which until then had doled out a paltry \$244,000 to VIA over 19 years. Most of the board's \$347 million in discretionary funds went to roads, with a smattering for sidewalks and bicycle lanes.

"Things change," planning board Chairman Richard Perez said. "It's setting up a great tone for who we are and where we're going."

Maybe someday

But it's going to be longer — perhaps much longer — before anyone in San Antonio will be able to hop on light rail.

If bus rapid transit proves itself, maybe the bus-only lanes, bigger transit stations and other upgrades can be converted to a light-rail line, said Tuggey, VIA's former chairman.

"I haven't written off light rail," he said. "You're possibly looking at light rail in 10 years, maybe a little longer."

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